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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E SARA SKORUPSKI

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SUBJECT: NCA PRESSES FOR U.S. ACTION IN ERITREA/ETHIOPIA

Classified By: Ambassador Benson K. Whitney, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. On June 14, Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) General Secretary Reverend Atle Sommerfeldt and Special Advisor Arne Saeveraas called upon Ambassador Whitney, requesting USG support in easing escalating Eritrean/Ethiopian tensions. (Note: The NCA is the largest NGO in Norway involved in development assistance. End Note). Specifically, the NCA believes that the USG can influence Ethiopia to respect the territorial boundaries supported by the U.N. Border Commission, in addition to assisting with a rapprochement between the Ethiopian government and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). End Summary.

NCA Views Conflict Fast Approaching

12. (C) Sommerfeldt described the unique peacekeeping role held by the NCA in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The NCA's long-term relationship with both countries took root in the 1970s, when it served as the lead ecumenical NGO during the bloody border conflict. This role allowed the NCA to forge strong relations with both the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which now plays a sizable role in the in the current Eritrean government, and current members of the Ethiopian government. Sommerfeldt noted that the political leadership of both countries recognize and respect the NCA, which has also established and maintained significant contacts within both countries' religious organization leadership.

13. (C) Based upon discussions with his Eritrean sources and visits to Asmara, the Reverend fears that military preparations are underway, with the public mood likely supporting a war. The Eritrean Head of Political Affairs informed him that the country was indeed preparing for war, and that "a small country like Eritrea would never accept being pushed around by Ethiopia," with Eritreans willing to die for this belief. Sommerfeldt spoke at length concerning the dichotomies between the "classical hard dictatorship" in Eritrea (which recently expelled Presbyterians in a series of anti-religious organization moves) as compared to the current Ethiopian democratic government. Sommerfeldt voiced concerns that the Eritrean dictatorship possibly will support a war as a means of justifying its existence, and expanding its power. He believes tensions will be further exacerbated when the Border Commission wraps up and delivers its final plan in November. Any war, Sommerfeldt surmises, will occur prior to this date. Sommerfeldt stressed that if war breaks out, it will be vast in scope, with the Ethiopians unlikely to show any restraint, perhaps taking over all of Eritrea to ensure Red Sea access. He speculated that the Eritreans may also be war-weary, which could affect their resistance to an Ethiopian incursion.

14. (C) Sommerfeldt observed that the Eritrean frustration that the international community has agreed on the border set by the UN Border Commission, while the implementation of the Commission's conclusions have not been adopted by Ethiopia. Ethiopia also continues to occupy Badme. Sommerfeldt notes that Ethiopia at least implicitly recognizes the Commission's findings, but still refuses to implement them. For example, he noted that Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zanawi's recent address to the Ethiopian Parliament which recognizes the Commission's decision, which has been publicly supported by the Ethiopian Foreign Minister. Sommerfeldt also warns that any provocative measures by Eritrea would allow the Ethiopian government to view Eritrea as a "terrorist regime," which then would "justify" Ethiopian military action. Prime Minister Zanawi also has a personal stake in the Border Commission's resolutions, as members of his tribe suffered along the border. Ironically, Sommerfeldt also pointed out that Zanawi and Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki both have parents who are Eritrean and Ethiopian, further confusing the situation.

16. (C) Urging the U.S. to "flex its muscles and try harder," Sommerfeldt strongly encourages the U.S. to push the Ethiopians on following through with the borders set via the Border Commission.

Seeking USG to Broker Talks with Ethiopia, OLF

17. (C) Saeveraas also requested USG intervention in negotiations between the Ethiopian government and OLF. The NCA has spoken with the OLF leadership and Zanawi on a possible compromise. Saeveraas has been informed that the OLF would be allowed back into Ethiopia following the satisfaction of several conditions, including denouncing their armed struggle and accepting the government's democratic processes. The OLF does not trust the government, and told the NCA that the Ethiopian preconditions cannot be accepted unless the OLF has a role in a democratic society. Saeveraas emphasized that the time is ripe for negotiations, as the OLF has, for the first time, a greater interest than the Ethiopian government in settling the conflict. The NCA was informed that the Ethiopian Ambassador to the EU could be used as a back-channel conduit to facilitate dialogue between the government and the OLF. Saeveraas did not provide specific examples as to how the NCA should become involved.

18. (C) The NCA has been in frequent contact with the State Department and our missions in Ethiopia and Eritrea, with Sommerfeldt noting a forthcoming meeting with the U.S. Ambassador to Ethiopia. Sommerfeldt stressed that the NCA also works closely with several ecumenical organizations involved in both Eritrea and Ethiopia, including the World Council of Churches. He pointed out that Islamic groups want to also curtail fundamentalist wings which may become emboldened if an armed conflict emerges.

19. (C) Comment. The Ambassador emphasized that the USG certainly sought to prevent an armed conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Preventing regional tensions from erupting into violence and total war evidences the shared values held by both the GON and USG. The NCA voiced appreciation of USG cooperation, while welcoming the open, continued dialogue encouraged by the Ambassador. Sommerfeldt emphasized that although the information he provided has been voiced to other USG officials, the worsening situation warranted that the message be told to several key parties. The NCA is taken seriously by the GON. For example, the GON is strongly supporting the NCA's efforts, as evidenced by Sommerfeldt's comments to Pol/Off that MFA's Peace and Reconciliation Section provided significant financial resources to the NCA.
End Comment
Whitney